

The First Lady of Song

by Adele Switzer

"Just don't give up trying to do what you really want to do. Where there is love and inspiration, I don't think you can go wrong."

--Ella Fitzgerald

Ella Fitzgerald is known as The First Lady of Song and is among the greatest jazz singers. She used to say "I sing as I feel." She expressed all her emotions through her singing. She had an amazing and beautiful voice that let these feelings show. Ella could sing almost anything, too. Amazingly, she won 13 Grammy awards and sold over 40 million albums. Ella is extremely well known and is thanked for her amazing attitude and love for what she has done. As Johny Mathis said, "She was the best there ever was. Amongst all of us who sing, she was the best."

She was born on April 25, 1917 in Newport News, Virginia to Temperance "Tempie" and William Fitzgerald. Unfortunately, her parents separated soon after her birth. Tempie moved with her daughter to Yonkers, New York to live with her boyfriend, Joseph Da Silva. In 1932, Ella's mother tragically died in a car accident and she was taken to live with her aunt in Virginia. Her half sister, Frances Da Silva, soon joined Ella in Virginia after Joe, Ella's stepfather, died of a heart attack. Because of these traumatic events, Ella was unable to adjust to the new circumstances. Her grades had dropped excessively and she skipped school periodically. Ella eventually got into trouble with the police and was sent to a reform school. Life there seemed to be even worse than before. She eventually escaped from the reformatory and she was broke, homeless, and alone during the Great Depression.

In 1934, Ella was given an opportunity to compete in Amateur Night where she sang "Judy" and "The Object of My Affections." She said she felt amazing and fearless once on the stage. Soon after, Ella won every talent show she entered. She also got the chance to perform with Tiny Bradshaw where she met Chick Webb. He let Ella play with his band at Yale University where she was a major hit. She kept on traveling with this band where she made many songs that hit the top of the chart. One major recording was "A-Tisket, A-Tasket" which sold 1 million copies. Ella Fitzgerald had become an incredibly famous singer already. Unfortunately, Chick Webb died on June 16, 1939. Ella had become the bandleader and the band was renamed "Ella Fitzgerald and Her Famous Band." By 1942, she decided that she would begin a solo career, so she left the band.

In 1946, Ella fell in love with Ray Brown while on tour with Dizzy Gillespie's band. Ella and Ray were soon married and they adopted a child, named Ray Jr. Norman Granz, Ray's boss and a great producer and manager, saw that Ella had great talent and motivation. Ella soon signed with him and they became a great team. From then on, she worked with many other great singers and artists including Louis Armstrong, Cole Porter, Duke Ellington, the Gershwins, Johnny Mercer, Irving Berlin, Rodgers and Hart, Nat King Cole, and Frank Sinatra. She also was a usual

guest on a few hit television shows, including “The Bing Crosby Show,” “The Dinah Shore Show,” “The Frank Sinatra Show,” “The Ed Sullivan Show,” “The Tonight Show,” “The Nat King Cole Show,” “The Andy Williams Show,” and “The Dean Martin Show.” Her booming success made it so hard to see her family, but Ray Jr. and Ella reestablished their relationship while she and her husband got a divorce.

Since Ella Fitzgerald was African-American, she did face some discrimination. Fortunately, many people knew that her manager did not except any discrimination between musicians. If there was any discrimination in hotels, concert halls, or restaurants, he did not allow Ella to perform there. In Dallas one time, a few policemen came into Ella’s dressing room and found Dizzy Gillespie and Illinois Jacquet shooting dice. They then arrested everyone and once they got to the police station, they asked Ella for her autograph. Another person who stood up for Ella was Marilyn Monroe. Marilyn had called the owner of the Mocambo just so that Ella could sing there. Ella says in her own words that she owes Marilyn Monroe a real debt. Because of Marilyn Monroe, Ella only played in large jazz clubs and never in small jazz clubs.

Though Ella had a declining health, she began to work even harder than ever before. She toured all over the world sometimes solo and sometimes with other singers. In 1974, she performed with Frank Sinatra and Count Basie for two weeks in New York. Ella Fitzgerald eventually received the Kennedy Center Honors for her contributions to the arts and was put into the Down Beat magazine Hall of Fame. Ella also was awarded the National Medal of Arts by President Ronald Reagan in 1987. Ella Fitzgerald received so many memorable awards for her perseverance and wonderful voice, but she said that was one of the greatest moments of her wonderful life.

One other thing Ella did was contribute to organizations that supported children welfare. She wanted to help as many people as much as she could. Ella knew what it felt like to struggle and she wanted people not to feel so lonely and helpless. She contributed so much that she never wanted to stop singing and making money so that she could give her earnings to help those in need.

In 1986, she had to have a quintuple coronary bypass surgery and she had to get a valve in her heart replaced. She was even diagnosed with diabetes. The last time she performed was in 1991 at New York’s Carnegie Hall for the 26th time. Unfortunately, her diabetes had worsened and she had to get her legs amputated from the knees down. After this, Ella spent time with her son, Ray Jr., and her granddaughter, Alice. On June 15, 1996, Ella Fitzgerald died. A few hours later, a white reef lay by her star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and outside the Hollywood Bowl Theater there was a marquee that read, “We will miss you, Ella.” The thing about that sign is that it is completely true. We still miss Ella Fitzgerald. We should honor her by singing. After all, she did say the only thing better than singing is more singing.